



EARLY EDUCATION

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR
NORTH DAKOTA CHILDREN

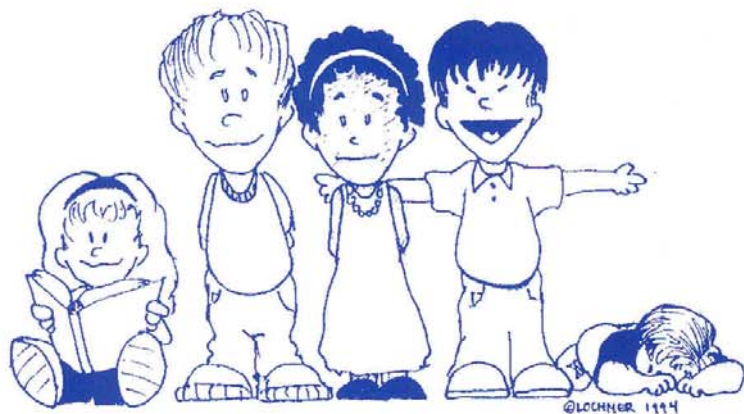
A NORTH DAKOTA KIDS COUNT! ISSUE BRIEF

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The Issue: Early Connections

In recent years, our society has experienced an information explosion regarding the significance of the early childhood years. A child's earliest developmental years have a lasting impact on his or her adult development. The first three years are particularly important to early brain development, based on both cognitive and emotional experiences. Researchers have concluded that the opportunity to develop optimally is directly related to the quality of a child's earliest experiences, which predict a child's ongoing ability to learn.

As recently as fifteen years ago, scientists thought the structure and functioning of the brain was genetically determined at birth and did not change in response to early environmental influences. Today, we know better. Early life experiences influence the way the brain is wired. Connections and pathways that are activated frequently will be retained. So, what does all this mean? It means that adults (parents, educators, child care providers, policy makers, etc.) who make decisions about the early experiences that will be made available to a child and the quality of these experiences care have an awesome responsibility. This publication will provide information and data regarding the status of early care and education in North Dakota.



Terms

Early Childhood: phrase referring to a child from birth to age 8.

Early education: phrase referring to the many experiences early in life, both formal and informal, that stimulate a child and his/her learning. Research supports the significance of early education for optimal brain development. One cannot separate early education from the early care received because they are tied to one another.

Developmentally appropriate care and education: education geared to the age of the child and experiences appropriate for the age and development of a child.

Infant: child 0 - 24 months

Toddler: child 24 - 36 months

Preschooler: child 3 - 6 years old

School-aged child: child 6 - 12 years old

Quality:

Quality care is that which is associated with positive outcomes for children. There are 3 ways to measure quality care. (1) interactions with caregivers, (2) structural features such as child/staff ratio, group size and (3) education/training of the provider. Structural features are more easily observed and regulated than interactions.

The Numbers: North Dakota's Young Child Population

- There are 23,299 North Dakota children under age 3, and 39,298 children under age 5.
- In North Dakota, 84% of children under age 6 live with families where both parents are employed, compared to 66% nationally.
- The percentage of women in the labor force with children under age 6 has displayed the most dramatic growth - increasing 42 percentage points between 1970 and 1990. North Dakota has one of the highest percentages in the US.
- The average annual cost of child care in North Dakota is \$4,184. Families of four earning poverty level incomes of \$17,050 annually would need to spend 25% of their pre-tax income on child care expenses.
- While the number of North Dakota women with children under age 18 has remained fairly constant since 1970, the percentage of these women participating in the labor force has increased markedly - from 35% in 1970 to 53% in 1980 to 74% in 1990.
- In the average month, about 4,160 North Dakota children receive state/federal subsidized child care assistance on a full or part-time basis.
- Only 12% of families eligible for child care subsidies receive these benefits.
- There are 2,476 North Dakota children enrolled in Head Start, representing only 70% of eligible children.

Types of Care

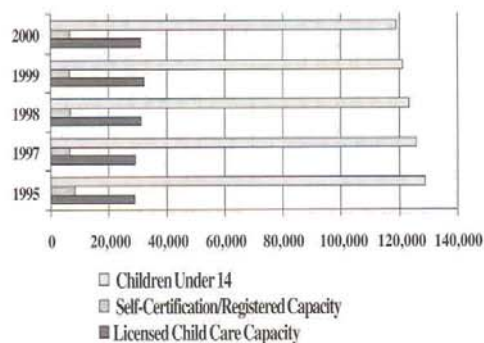
1. Licensed: In ND you must obtain a license if you care for over 5 children, including your own. There are 5 types of licenses: Family (up to 7 children), Group (between 8 and 18 children), Center (19 or more children), Preschool (up to 2 ½ hrs/day), and Latchkey (for school-aged children).
2. Self Certified: A legally unlicensed provider that has no more than 5 children, including their own, and no more than 3 under the age of 2. Self-Certification allows them to participate in government-funded programs such as food programs and childcare assistance.
3. Unlicensed: Anyone else caring for children. This can range from a neighbor or acquaintance caring for a couple children or a large number of children, to a grandmother caring for her grandchild.

Licensed Child Care in North Dakota

- Licensed care is available for about 1/4 of the children under age 14 who potentially need care. The remaining children are being cared for in unregulated care arrangements which can range from someone who is unlicensed and unmonitored to a grandmother caring for her grandchild, to an acquaintance who is not licensed, but cares for other children.
- The number of licensed child care providers in North Dakota has decreased slightly - from 2,096 in 1995 to 1,872 in 2000.
- Licensed child care capacity has grown during this same time period, from 28,847 in 1995 to 30,894 in 2000 - an increase of 7%.
- This increase in capacity at the same time the number of providers is decreasing suggests a move toward providers/facilities caring for larger numbers of children.

North Dakota Child Care Capacity

1995 and 1997-2000



(2001 North Dakota KidsCount! Fact Book)

The "Trilemma" of Child Care

Parents seeking child care are often faced with a 'trilemma'. The three key factors related to quality care are: Cost/affordability for parents, access to care, and compensation for providers. As each one changes, it affects the other. For example, when providers are paid an appropriate wage, cost of care increases and affects affordability, which in turn limits access. Parents across North Dakota are challenged in finding quality care for their children.



Cost / Affordability	Access	Compensation
Child care is arguably one of the largest expenses in the budget of working families. Average annual child care cost in North Dakota is \$4184. With more mothers entering the labor force to ensure the financial well-being of their families, the increasing costs of quality child care have been placed at the forefront of community discussions. More than half of all North Dakota families with children under the age of 13 require some non-parental assistance to help care for and supervise their children. In 1995, 60% of preschool age children routinely spent at least some time in non-parental care. Lower income families can spend up to one-quarter of their incomes on child care expenses.	In a rural state like North Dakota, it is not enough for parents to be able to pay for high quality child care- they must also have access to it. Many smaller communities simply do not have the population or the resources to offer parents access to the early care their children need. When child care isn't available in the area, parents must travel outside their community to obtain quality care for their children. Depending on the distance, traveling to care givers may create additional financial strain on families who already have limited options.	Currently, the state's child care workers are paid an average of \$5.98/hour; while preschool teachers are paid \$7.64/hour. The average wage for all North Dakota workers is \$9.23/hour. This is not to say there is no quality care in North Dakota- many care givers do heroic work in ensuring a quality environment for the children in their care. But, it is not realistic to expect that every provider will have the same high standards.

The Bottom Line... Children Deserve Quality Care

Why is quality care so important? Children in quality care tend to become more socially competent, emotionally secure, and intellectually capable. Quality child care positively influences development in language skills, relationships with teachers, and a child's self-perception. Children who receive inadequate care are more likely to be insecure with school teachers, have difficulty trusting other children, and face possible rejection by their classmates, among other challenges. Recent research also suggests that children who live in low-income families are likely to gain the most from high quality care, but are more likely to be negatively impacted by low-quality care.

What constitutes quality child care?

Numerous studies have outlined a listing of the most important factors that define quality care:

- Warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions between caregiver and child.
- Small group size.
- Stable and consistent relationships between caregiver and child.
- Well-trained staff.
- Stimulating and age appropriate activities which supports children's learning.

Training for early care and education professionals is essential in order to ensure the highest quality of care. Important components of the child care quality discussion are training and pay for caregivers. Staff education is critical to ensure a high quality environment.

Early Education: Rethinking the Brain

The Families and Work Institute published a comprehensive summary of brain research findings related to early childhood and early education in 1999. The author, Rima Shore, provides an excellent primer for those wanting to understand and act upon the new research findings. The following excerpts point to the significance of this field of research and the need for greater attention to early care and education issues from parents, educators, and policy makers.

New Insights

Every field of study has peak moments of discovery when past knowledge and new insights produce stunning advances. The neuroscience and early childhood education fields are no exception. In recent years, brain research has been stimulated by a growing concern about the status of children in America- their academic achievement, health, safety, and overall well-being. New insights can lead to efforts to recast policy and reconsider the best use of public resources. Three key findings include:

1. An individual's capacity to learn and thrive in a variety of settings depends on the interplay between nature (their genetic endowment) and nurture (the kind of care, stimulation and teaching they receive).
2. The human brain- across all cultural and racial groups- is uniquely constructed to benefit from experience and from good teaching, particularly during the first years of life.
3. While the opportunities and risks are greatest during the first years of life, learning takes place throughout the human life cycle.

Connectivity

*Nature provides prime times for development and learning and we need to take advantage of these times.
But it is never too late to improve the quality of a child's life.*

Connectivity is a crucial feature of brain development because the neural pathways formed during the early years carry signals and allow us to process information throughout our lives. How, and how well, we think and learn- both as children and as adults, has a great deal to do with the extent and nature of these connections.

Mothers and fathers are not, and should not be made to feel that they are solely responsible. How do we balance the need for optimal programs and opportunities for children with the responsibilities of parenthood? North Dakota has one of the highest percentages of both parents being employed while their children are under 6 years old. North Dakota is challenged to examine ways to support these families, and all families, with options for quality early education and care while parents are at work. Children need and deserve policies and programs that reflect what we now know from the emerging field of brain research.

Old Thinking	New Thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How a brain develops depends on the genes you are born with.• The experiences you have before the age of three have a limited impact on later development.• A secure relationship with a primary caregiver creates a favorable context for early development and learning.• Brain development is linear: the brain's capacity to learn and change grows steadily as an infant progresses toward adulthood.• A toddler's brain is much less active than the brain of a college student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How a brain develops hinges on a complex interplay between the genes you are born with and the experiences you have.• Early experiences have a decisive impact on the architecture of the brain, and on the nature and extent of adult capacities.• Early interactions don't just create context: they directly affect the way the brain is wired.• Brain development is non-linear. There are prime times for acquiring different kinds of knowledge and skills.• By the time children reach age three, their brains are twice as active as those of adults. Activity levels drop during adolescence.

Policy Implications for North Dakota

In most areas of study, what we don't know far exceeds what we do know. Brain research is no exception and the years ahead promise to provide more new discoveries. But the information available today is ample enough to demand our attention and action. The following implications are derived from the publication, *Rethinking The Brain* (Families and Work Institute, 1997):

1. Improve health and protection by providing preventive and primary health coverage for expectant and new parents and their young children.
2. Promote responsible parenthood by enhancing proven approaches.
3. Safeguard children in child care from harm and promote their learning and development.
4. Enable communities to have the flexibility and the resources they need to mobilize on behalf of young children and their families.
5. Convey new knowledge about the brain and its impact on young children to families and the public at large. Care enough about the needs of young children to regularly examine practices and policies.



Think About It...

If a business knew how to solve one of their most pressing problems, yet failed to develop a strategic plan to gradually do so, most people would question the leadership. Each one of us has the opportunity to take some leadership to address the early care and education needs of our state's children. We have scientific proof that quality early childhood care and education are key to ensuring healthy growth and development both intellectually and emotionally. Think about the following questions as you consider your role in ensuring brighter futures for all children.

- Are decision makers and community leaders aware of the implications of new brain research?
- Have North Dakota communities engaged elected officials and business leaders in collaborations to ensure quality, affordable care for the state's children?
- Are communities exploring innovative partnerships with businesses and school districts to provide high quality early education for all children?
- How many people in my community struggle to find quality early care & education resources and need financial assistance to help them pay for these resources?
- What are the options for families who require child care services, but cannot find affordable, quality care in their communities?
- If North Dakota expanded eligibility levels for the Child Care and Development Fund, how many additional families with children could receive subsidized child care services?
- With Head Start serving only 70% of eligible children, what can be done to ensure that all eligible children receive services?
- Under welfare reform legislation enacted in 1996, states are allowed to use a portion of their federal grants to cover child care expenses for needy families. North Dakota currently does not use any of its welfare dollars for this purpose. What message do we need to send to our policy makers that will encourage them to increase funding for working poor families to help them cover the cost of child care services?
- Do parents throughout North Dakota have the resources and educational information needed to best support their child's development?

Final Thoughts...

The brain holds the key to our highest potential. If programs and policies can increase the number of children who become productive adults and decrease the number requiring special education, mental health, and child protective services, then what can **you** do to help early care and education become a top priority? What will it take? How can you make a contribution?

- If you are a **parent** in need of quality care or parenting resources, begin by asking for them. If your voice is not heard, decision makers will not know this is a major concern for North Dakotans.
- If you are a **policy maker**, begin by putting early care and education issues at the forefront of your mind as you review proposals and legislation. Ask tough questions about what North Dakota is doing and compare it to other states. Know that much more can be done to enhance the healthy growth and development of the state's infants and children. North Dakota does not provide state subsidized child care for the hard working parents who earn incomes above the federal poverty level, but still struggle to access affordable high quality care for their children. Nor does the state subsidize Head Start to allow its full utilization by eligible parents.
- If you are a **service provider or teacher**, begin by inquiring about exemplary programs and policies in other states. Then take the information to your supervisors and community leaders to ask for their support in making things happen for the children you serve.
- If you are a **community leader**, through your efforts address the needs of parents to provide the best care possible for children.

Summary

This publication provides the most recent information available, combined with a challenge to each citizen of North Dakota to do what he or she can to improve the well-being of the state's children. Whether you are involved at the local, county, regional, state, or national level, you can take the first step to study the issues related to children and bring your information and ideas to decision makers at any level you feel you can make a difference.

References

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